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# Finding the Themes Related to Designing Learning for Post-Experience, Management Professionals: How to Conduct Qualitative Research

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**Abstract.** The current landscape of management learning literature, concerned with curriculum design, (and more specifically postgraduate level management learning) is reviewed by drawing from several eminent works within this domain of study, to identify the points being made overall and then to draw out the key themes. The process by which this is conducted is defined to provide a structure and framework in an applied example of literature theming at postgraduate level research. It indicates how to explore the extent of what is presently understood within a discipline area and how to determine the further explorations to be undertaken. The author contributes to the important debate on how we can demystify qualitative research in the domain of social science and applies this to how we can explore Higher Education's responsiveness to the curriculum needs of post-experience, management professionals.

**Keywords,** qualitative research methods, postgraduate educational research, theming literature, management learning, curriculum design and pedagogy

## 1 Introduction

Postgraduate level research seeks to bring about *new knowledge* (Harland and Plangger, 2004) through the collection of quantitative and qualitative data sets gathered from the various domains within society which offer the opportunity for study of the situation in question. Social science forms one of these domains and from an overall perspective, it's research considers the purpose, questions, current knowledge, the approach needed, and the methods of data gathering towards the analysis and subsequent conclusions. At the higher levels of study of a phenomenon, it is essential to underpin the research process with a strong philosophical foundation of social science and to establish a deep understanding of the theory within the specific domain of study, as this allows for the subsequent generation of new knowledge. It is not essential that the research process takes place on a totally linear, step-by-step basis, as this would make the research process too rigid and therefore not allow for emergent arguments and developing knowledge (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As such an iterative approach can be taken towards the research process, wherein emerging theoretical positions can be combined with the established ones; which is particularly pertinent in studies that are conducted during a period of turbulence; which is currently the case for management education (Anderson, Hibbert, Mason, & Rivers, 2018). Although, it should be noted that this approach requires that the relevant evolving literature is regularly considered. Ultimately, there will be a point of time in the study when the position being substantiated by the literature must be clarified (Oliver, 2012), which then enables a categoric indication of how the narrower study of postgraduate, post-experience, management learning curriculum design, fits within the broad context of higher education (HE) business and management curriculum design.

Researching management learning becomes more pertinent in a marketized higher education (HE) system as business and management education forms a large proportion of the student body, both for undergraduate and postgraduate provision. Pertinently, Alvesson and Sandberg (2013), when considering the associated increase in business schools provision over the last thirty years, state that



management studies has not necessarily led to an increase in interesting and influential work but that there are concerns about the process of ‘gap-spotting’ in which case a more creative approach should be encouraged in order to avoid reinforcing the current position. This is bringing in theoretical perspectives from management studies, as related to change; and higher education studies, as related to curriculum design. This means that there will be a range of ways of exploring and understanding the phenomena of HE postgraduate, post-experience management learning, which offers the opportunity to avoid the usual contribution of new theories acting to supersede previous ones (Shay, Ashwin, & Case, 2009), thus igniting scholarly creativity (Bell & Bridgman, 2018) and identifying and posing challenges to be faced in the future.

## 2 Demystifying Qualitative Research within the Social Sciences

Research can consider the existence and nature of phenomena, the scope and extent of which, for the social sciences, is set out within Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2018:) guidelines indicating the way in which this is undertaken in specific domains. The two approaches related to the education discipline research emanate from the perspective of *promoting* theoretical and/or empirical social science; and from the perspective of *informing* judgements and decisions about educational policy and practice (Wilkinson, 2005:29). Both perspectives can be deployed to be able, firstly, to draw out the detail of what is already understood about a domain and then, secondly, to be able to contribute to the possibilities of a more knowledgeable and informed future.

Establishing that a social science study will be conducted using qualitative research methods is helped when the defining features of qualitative research methods are understood, in that, the study will provide rich and relevant detailed descriptions of the phenomena (Sandelowski, 2004). In this example, the primary study will explore the perspectives and actions of postgraduate, post-experience management learning curriculum design. It will consider how courses of study are constructed by academics within HE, and the degree to which they include theoretical and practical learning components in relation to being responsive to the curriculum needs of the postgraduate professional learner typology. Whilst to a certain degree, we can seek to explain the current understanding of the situation through the use of a literature review, it is through the further exploration of the ‘social reality’ that we can hope to interpret and thereby understand the social phenomena (Grix, 2010). The resultant written account of the study, requires the researcher to show an understanding the actor’s point of view and the applied practice of curriculum design in this context. Therefore, the benefit of understanding the current debate, as related to postgraduate management learning curriculum design, provides the picture of the current academic understanding of the phenomena; and thereby the opportunity to explore the relationship between current theory and current practice.

### 2.1 Conducting Postgraduate, Qualitative Research in the Domain of Education and Management Learning

Establishing the ontological position is the first step in the construction of the research and is particularly pertinent to postgraduate social science research (Thomas, 2017); with this comes the challenges of being very specific in clarifying ‘*what you are looking at*’ and the appreciation of the different perspectives from which this might be viewed. In this case, ontologically, the considerations are related to exploring how the curriculum is designed for post-experience, management professionals to determine the current issues as related to its responsiveness towards the postgraduate professional (PGP) learner typology. Additionally, the epistemological planning of the research process will enable you to determine how you will go about looking for knowledge in the



specific domain, and then to clarify the procedures to be used for discovering the current knowledge; and then for being able to explore the domain and phenomena further and in more depth.

The process of research begins by considering *what theory is* within educational research, where it comes from and the interest that it presents. In the domain of educational research, as an aspect of social science, the process and activities should consider the situations and problems of teaching and learning and should seek to clarify the issues that have a direct or indirect influence or impact within the specific context (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). In terms of being a qualitative management researcher, who is conducting research in the specific domain of management learning, (Cassell, Bishop, Symon, Johnson, & Buehring, 2009) determine the problematic nature of defining qualitative research skills; particularly drawing on the argument of Denzin & Lincoln (2013), stating that the skills requirements are diverse and tend to require the qualitative researcher to be a '*bricoleur*' stitching together the pieces of a quilt from a 'range of materials'. In which case, the process is one that requires careful planning and exploration supported by strategic thinking, flexibility and creativity (Sandelowski, 2004), which characterizes the qualitative researcher who can then be able to disseminate findings based on robust and credible study principles.

In justifying the deployment of these philosophical and methodological perspectives, as applied to the exploration of management learning curriculum design, we can draw upon the work of Arbaugh (2016), who questions the whereabouts and presence of the dedicated scholars of management learning and education. A critical point that Arbaugh makes is that (for the most part), management education research has not been addressed in doctoral programs of study and he cites the work of Billsberry (2012), in stating that there is a limited opportunity to be grounded in the management education literature, leaving an identified weakness in this domain that should be addressed. Although Billsberry does note that the field of study is maturing and that no matter what the topic of study, that there is likely to be available writing [literature] about it.

### 3 Perspectives of the Literature Review

In clarifying the role of the literature review, Oliver (2012) determines the way in which it addresses the requirement to be grounded in the domain of study; and that it is this grounding that then forms the foundation upon which the rest of the study stands, and therefore holds up. A more critical approach is required at the postgraduate level of study (Wilkinson, 2005), which, in this case seeks to clarify alternative views of past research of management education and learning. Cassell, Bishop, Symon, Johnson, & Buehring (2009) explore the characteristics and skills requirements for conducting a good standard of qualitative management research that is likely to be pluralistic in nature. They state that the research will take place within broad-ranging ontological and epistemological perspectives, which understandably makes the process and its associated experience hard to define within individual projects, and therefore hard to provide a prescription indicating precisely how the research should be conducted. Notably, their qualitative research data, exploring the skills and knowledge requirements of qualitative management researchers, established that there is a manner in which the required skills and knowledge can be learned and developed. The skills discussed in their findings, include being able to review the work of others; pertinently, the argument here related to the process of peer review and critiquing research literature as essential to the academic work [practice] of management researchers.

If we explore the process of conducting a literature review from an information and knowledge management perspective we can draw upon the four dimensions articulated by Rowe (2014) which are determined to be: (1) to achieve a goal of describing, understanding or explaining, (2) to establish the breadth of the domain of the study, (3) to systematically consider the extent, quality and source of the literature, and (4) to argue and 'provide order' to the literature. Although they maintain that



the purpose of the literature review is to 'map' the territory and that all literature reviews aim at a better understanding of the domain. Moreover, he states that the breadth is dependent on the type and intention of the study. Therefore, in this applied example, the extent of the literature related to management education and learning is targetted at the items which relate to the HE postgraduate perspective of post-experience management learning and the design of the curriculum therein, as opposed to the general design and provision of management learning. In providing guidance for PhD students and others who are looking to submit their papers to recognized outlets, he mentions that the undertaking of the literature review, within the dimensions that the research conceptualizes, and as an exercise of clarification, can contribute to knowledge. Pertinently, the more that the review departs from the first dimension of the descriptive intention, towards the argumentative one, the more it can orient itself towards theory building. So following the guidance from Rowe (2014), this specific study will strive to identify themes and thereby be able to determine thematic gaps and theoretical bias towards being able to propose the future research requirement and therefore the focus for the primary study.

### **3.1 The Route to the Literature in the Context of Management Learning Curriculum Design**

Adopting appropriate and effective management [learning] research practice, as a narrower, synthesized element within education research, enables the appreciation of the fundamental importance of the underlying themes that provide the universal laws of education and curriculum theory (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018) Following this approach, thereby guides the process from this solid starting point. Whilst research methods guidance literature will provide direction for the process of the literature review, it is also necessary to explore the application of these methods to the theories of higher education curriculum and pedagogy and more narrowly, to the specific context of management learning. Based on these principles, the theoretical starting point for this study is related to the study of the curriculum perspectives within education systems, and theoretical considerations of management learning content and teaching processes. The key emphasis can then be narrowed down to explore the curriculum and pedagogy as adopted for postgraduate, post-experience management learners. Depending on the mode of study, seeking out the relevant literature related to curriculum design and pedagogy, will follow different paths. For taught social studies, reading lists will be the initial stage of guiding the literature to be read and reviewed, and therefore the theoretical position from which the study can begin. Contrastingly, for social science PhD, reserach students, the independent and autonomous nature of the study process, necitates that there be a realistic and categoric identification of the literature that relates to the area of study, otherwise there will be no solid foundation and therefore it will be difficult to substantiate academic rigour and thereafter, the work will have restricted its academic value.

## **4 Finding the Themes within the Postgraduate Management Learning and Curriculum Literature**

If the process begins with the researcher having identified what appears to them to be a 'problem' area it may not be the case that a broad and deep understanding is already established for the precise, narrow area of study. For this example, the trigger for the research emanates from the concerns of the researcher following a masters degree project exploring the topic of individual and organisational development. In doing so, interest was provoked as to the narrower perspective of management learning as appropriate and responsive to post-experience management professionals. Whilst the degree course was not explicitly applied to management learning, the context of the study required



an understanding of the literature related to organisational strategy, management structure and control, including the way in which the development of the organisation was closely interrelated and dependent on the management capability and the development of the individual in the manager role. The associated overarching and essential reading contained a broad range of literature which had a high level emphasis on management principles and development. During the induction tour our student group was taken to the book shop and strongly encouraged to purchase one particular text, namely Burgoyne & Reynolds (1997), *Management Learning: Integrating Perspectives in Theory and Practice*. This text book has transpired to be an extremely valuable item of literature that has been used regularly as a reminder of key arguments and as a substantiator of the foundation of this study.

Arguments and conclusions within social science literature very often conclude by providing an indication and direction of the future requirements of research within a domain. The closure of the Burgoyne and Reynolds text enables Reynolds (1997), to talk about the critiques of management education and in particular the development of managers who are able to operate more critically and creatively. Here the chance is taken to indicate that there has been evidence of consideration for the content [curriculum] of management education, but that less emphasis was being given to the educational methodology [pedagogy]. The arguments relate to the developments in the design of management learning and to how managers are operating and developing within their organisations. The chapter concludes with the determination of the importance of educational [design] methodology as applied to the context of management learning provision. This refers to the argument that management learning should be designed from a critical perspective. When this critical, deeper and broader exploration is adopted, it requires that there is a consideration the students' experience both of the content of management learning, and of the process of management learning. Hence, it is the perspectives of learning content (curriculum) and teaching process (pedagogy) that provide the theoretical scope from which to launch the exploration of the literature. The challenge then is to gather the items of literature that explore HE, postgraduate, management learning curriculum and pedagogy from the perspective of the provision for post-experience management professionals. However, in doing so, the study must also be drawing theoretical positioning from the complimentary management research element of this project which relates to the responsiveness by HE to the needs of these management learners. Now that the scope and intention of the literature review have been defined the process of reading and review becomes the dominant activity for the researcher and at this point of the study, the social scientist begins to seek out the key concepts and ideas (Oliver, 2012) towards being ready to conduct primary qualitative research that will further add to that knowledge.

## 5 Distilling the High-Level Themes in Preparation for Primary Research

Rigorous and credible qualitative social science research requires that there are thematic based categories within which the investigator applies the art of description, comparison and explanation (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Moreover, the explicit establishment of these themes substantiates the research process and will direct the focus of the study to enable constructive communication of the findings. However, the two categories which have currently been established are the *high-level* themes of management learning; that is: (1), curriculum design and (2), pedagogy. We can adopt the research specific aspects of these by referring to them as: management learning content, and the teaching of management. As the themes of the study are further clarified, it is essential that the contextual application of these are kept with close consideration of postgraduate provision of management education as designed for post-experience, professional managers. So, we can now confirm that the study relates to postgraduate curriculum design and pedagogy in the context post-experience, management education.





Researching within the high-level category literature would begin with the articulation from the general argument which considers the approach taken to the design of the curriculum within HE and the pedagogical approaches deployed. Within HE curriculum, the work of Biggs (1996) has been very influential in considering the curriculum from the perspective of improving the quality of the provision in terms of the subject matter and how it is constituted. More recent high-level HE literature, that asserts the constructive alignment approach to curriculum design, seeks to demonstrate how the approach can assist higher quality learning and in particular how it might improve the learning experience in a range of learning situations (Trigwell & Prosser, 2014). Notably, the literature is often separated to explore either undergraduate or postgraduate provision and curriculum design as operational within HE.

What happens next is the identification of the specific contextual literature as related to postgraduate, management learning as targeted to post-experience professionals. This ensures that the study moves towards the narrower focus. In the applied and more granular context of management learning, and the HE curriculum design for post-experience management professionals, the task of identifying appropriate literature is one that must be very targeted. In this case it was essential to firstly determine the product on offer to management learners of this type as characteristically different from undergraduates and pre-experience, postgraduates who may also be involved in management learning. This stage of the process required that the current offering of management learning in the English HE provision was scrutinized for entry criteria and that a list of provision of management learning as marketed to this learner type was established. This acted to establish that the dominant course of study for this learner type is currently the Master of Business Administration (MBA), and that it may be referred to in a range of product descriptions such as Executive MBA (EMBA). This raises two sub-themes within the research and provides an indication of the literature to be reviewed at the next stage of the process. Firstly, as the MBA is the dominant HE course for this learner type, that there appears to be a requirement to consider the design of its content and its teaching approach. This has been justified by recent research that seeks to explore how the MBA course might move towards enacting a curriculum which is congruent with management realities (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009) and thereby advocates being able to create a curriculum that is responsive to the needs of this learner type. And, secondly, that the practice of design and delivery of executive education acts in the interests of executive (post-experience) management learners (Turnbull-James & Denyer, D, 2009), and that it may thereby offer a more responsive approach to their needs.

## 6 Conclusions

This account sought out to define the process of a qualitative social research project and how the literature review has taken place towards being able to establish the key themes of the study and thereafter the narrower sub-themes. It sought to bring together the perspectives of management research and education research to be able to show how these can be synthesized in their considerations. Understanding HE change and marketization has led to adopting a more critical consideration of how the curriculum and pedagogy for postgraduate, post-experience management learners can be understood and how further study might inform future developments and a more qualitative variation. The initial categories of the study are justified to be that of curriculum content and the teaching process. The narrower focus is identified to be MBA course design and the interests of executive management learners. A future paper will give an account of the next stages of the process.



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